

Pittsburgh's Catholic Writers: A Legacy of Faith

Mike Aquilina

Mike Aquilina is author or editor of more than a dozen books on Catholic history, doctrine, and devotion. He is vice president of the Saint Paul Center for Biblical Theology in Steubenville, Ohio. Along with Scott Hahn, Mike cohosts several popular television programs on EWTN.

Three weeks ago, when I saw the advertisement for [The Catholic Writers Dinner] in Pittsburgh Catholic, with my photograph placed alongside those of Bishop Zubik, Dr. Muto, Father Gruber, Mr. Lockwood, and Mr. [Regis] Flaherty, I remembered a story about the poet Howard Nemerov. In one remarkable week in 1977, Mr. Nemerov received word that he had won the Pulitzer Prize and then the National Book Award. His reaction was exuberant. He cried out, "Overrated! At last!"

I took those very words as my own. *Overrated! At last!* A writer knows when he's outclassed by present company. But he lives for such moments. So I thank God and the Historical Society for inviting me to share such an Olympian table. I am happy to be overrated if it means I am allowed to praise this city's Catholic culture — if I am allowed to praise our communion of saints [and] the Church of Pittsburgh.

I didn't have the privilege of growing up here. But that hardly matters. To grow up when I did was to live off the largesse of Pittsburgh's Catholic literary scene. My friends and I, like millions in our generation, learned our early lessons in the faith from the picture books produced by that prolific priest of Western Pennsylvania's coal fields, Father Lawrence Lovasik.

Father Lovasik had an almost-papally infallible instinct for identifying the facts that resonated with kids. We consumed his "Picture Book of Saints," his catechisms and prayerbooks, and his primers on angelology and sacraments. As we grew older, Father Lovasik offered us spiritual direction in the finer points of kindness and Eucharistic devotion. He guided us along simple paths to the divine life, to the familiar places in our neighborhoods where heaven meets earth.

When we went off to school — if we went to

Catholic schools, as my mother insisted we must — we took our lessons from Pittsburgh authors. If our school was struggling, we were still using textbooks produced in the early twentieth century by Pittsburgh's Father Jerome Hannan — his "Bible History: A Textbook of the Old and New Testaments"; and his excellent "The Story Of The Church, Her Founding, Mission And Progress." In my hometown, these books retained canonical status, more than half a century after their first publication because Father Hannan had eventually become bishop of our diocese.

If a school of my generation was more well off and up to date, then it could afford the state-of-the-art textbooks, like the Cathedral Basic Readers produced by Monsignor John B. McDowell. They were no less Catholic than their predecessors, though they bore more modern-sounding titles like "Cavalcades," "All Around America," "Fun with Our Family," and "Fun Wherever We Are."

Monsignor McDowell, too, would go on to become a bishop — an auxiliary here in Pittsburgh. And I know him well enough to know that he would pass along any credit for Pittsburgh's Catholic literary culture to the generations before him. In fact, over the last decade, he has devoted his own literary labors to that end: writing histories that give cultural credit, across the centuries, wherever it's due.

He would have us hear the voice of Pittsburgh's church in those who lived here, and wrote here, and have been raised to the altars: John Neumann, Francis Seelos, Maria Theresa Gerhardinger, Katharine Drexel — but also in those whose fame was more local, though no less fascinating, and maybe no less important to history — and whose lives, in some cases, were perhaps no less holy than those who have been canonized: Michael O'Connor, Suitbert Mollinger, James Cox, and Adrian van Kaam.

If we draw the genealogical lines, we would all, I think, find our way back to a remarkable man of the nineteenth century, Monsignor Andrew Lambing (1842-1918), a prodigious and prolific man of letters. Not least among his accomplishments was the founding of the Catholic Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, which still sponsors an annual lecture in his honor. Monsignor Lambing wrote the foundational histories of Allegheny County and of Pittsburgh — and he wrote histories of the Dioceses of Pittsburgh and of Allegheny. He wrote serious theological studies in pneumatology (the science of the Holy Spirit) and mariology (the study of the Blessed Virgin), as well as a handbook of comfort for children who had lost their parents.

Academic history was his avocation, which he pursued in addition to the running of parishes and an orphanage. A giant of a man, grown fit through his early work on farms, in brickyards, and in an oil refinery, he served as a priest for 30 years before he missed a single day on account of illness. He is reputed never to have taken a vacation.

In the multivolume “History of Pittsburgh and Environs” published by the American Historical Society in 1922, Monsignor Lambing is listed prominently among the region’s “Men Widely Famed.” How prominently? Well, he appears just after Charles Schwab and George Westinghouse, but before Andrew Carnegie and Henry Clay Frick. He’s number three out of forty men identified as builders of this region.

I get exhausted just thinking about Monsignor Lambing’s literary accomplishments, which seem to have been an afterthought to his pastoral work and brick-and-mortar administration. But I can’t help but be grateful to him for setting the high standard for the next generations — for Father Hannan, Father

Lovasik, and then Monsignor McDowell and so many others.

Twenty-three years ago this month I dropped, as if by a providential parachute, into this wonderful culture when I took a writing job at a high-tech company in the suburbs of Pittsburgh. My wife and I fell in love with this place and this church. Here we’ve raised our six children in the faith on a hearty diet of Lovasik, Hannan and McDowell as well as Muto, Gruber, Lockwood, Lawler, Wuerl and Hugo. We cannot quite imagine leaving. It’s good to be here, as everyone in this room well knows.

It’s a privilege for me to speak here tonight and get all these mushy affections out of my system. If I have to be overrated for a moment to seize the opportunity, so be it!

As for my own accomplishments, I’ll prefer to recall an experience I had speaking to a group of Catholic high school students here in the city. It was a career-day sort of thing, and I was supposed to talk about my important work as a writer. I rattled off the titles of my books as if they were a long litany, figuring the kids would be impressed.

Then I invited questions about the writing life. I was ready to play the seasoned sage and after an awkward pause a hand went up in the back. “Yes?” I said as I pointed to the young man.

And he asked me a question that is good to remember as I stand here among my heroes, past and present. He said, “Um, have you ever written anything that anyone would actually read?”

Perhaps for the first time in my life I was left speechless. And I’ll take this moment now to begin the second time. Thank you for being here, and for listening.

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